



NEWS RELEASE

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State parks closing while parks' popularity soars

Keeping all parks open critical to economic turnaround of NYS

In a strange disconnect, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) announced last week that attendance at state parks and historic sites was up one million over the previous year while, at the same time, parks and historic sites have been closing and drastically cutting back services and open hours.

The steady decline in the state parks budget (18 percent over the last three years), mandated layoffs, and early retirements mean that three western New York parks are on the chopping block: Knox Farm in East Aurora, Woodlawn Beach in Hamburg, and Joseph Davis in Lewiston. In addition, Herkimer Home near Little Falls is slated to close. And across the system, shortened days, hours, and seasons of operations have become the norm. Which parks will be next?

Recent testimony given at a New York State Assembly hearing by Acting Commissioner of OPRHP Andy Beers referenced the inevitability of more cuts and closures given the agency's dire budget situation.

“This death by 1,000 cuts to the legacy of our magnificent state park system is appalling,” says Robin Dropkin, Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York, the statewide advocacy group. “Plus, given the significant economic impact of the state parks system, it is counter-productive.”

These closings have left park supporters scrambling in eleventh-hour efforts to keep their parks open. They are hoping for corporate sponsorships, public-private partnerships or local government management. But many New York businesses and municipalities are struggling with their own budgets and hard-pressed to muster the resources to take on management of a state park, never mind an historic site with valuable buildings and artifacts.

This move to alternative management arrangements for state parks raises some serious questions. Is compelling a municipality to take on the responsibility of a park in order to preserve the park's economic benefits to the community simply shifting taxpayers' burden to another level of government? Will all park regions and communities have access to equitable arrangements? Will there be adequate oversight to maintain the integrity of the state park system?

“State parks are very special public places, held in trust for all New Yorkers,” says Dropkin. “No matter who opens the gates and mows the grass, they must be open to every New Yorker and the extraordinary landscapes and natural and cultural resources they contain must be protected for future generations.”

An independent study commissioned by Parks & Trails New York revealed that the NYS Park System contributes \$1.9 billion annually to the state's economy, a 5 to 1 return on investment. Plus the system supports 20,000 jobs, not including parks employees. Therefore, closing parks actually costs the state and nearby communities millions of dollars in economic benefits. This is especially true for upstate communities for which state parks and historic sites are often the primary economic engines.

Last spring, 88 parks were threatened with closure to save a mere \$11 million, a proposal that was greeted with outrage and a loud uproar from the public and local and state legislators. Any further cuts to the parks budget will result in more park closures that will infuriate the public and only exacerbate the state's fiscal situation.

“Parks cannot again be a casualty of Albany's political gamesmanship without hurting the state's economy and the 57 million visitors to New York's parks last year. A healthy park system is a vital part of a healthy NYS economy. The state parks budget is less than 1/5 of 1 percent of the total state budget. It is penny wise and pound foolish to keep cutting the state parks budget,” says Dropkin.

Parks & Trails New York is the state's leading advocate for parks and trails, working since 1985 to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout the state for use and enjoyment by all. Learn more at www.ptny.org.

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